

WEHIRIYA - A MISSING GRAVE AND A LOST TOWN

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ABSTRACT

The discovery and identification of the grave of a Buginese princess near Dili, East Timor, indicates a closer nexus between South Sulawesi and Timor than previously thought, and a Bugis/Makassan settlement predating Portuguese occupation.

KEYWORDS: Bugis, Dili, graves, Hera, history, historic site, Islam, Makassans, Timor.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution is part of my ongoing research into the Makassan voyages to Australia since the 16th century, and the expansion of Islam to the Kingdoms of Gowa and Tallo in South Sulawesi and Waihale in Timor.

Whilst working in Makassar, Zainuddin Daeng Pabetta, a descendant of the Kings of Tallo, recounted traditional legends relating to the expeditions to Timor by the Kings of Tallo in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries at the behest of the Solorese in a bid to oust the Portuguese.

DISCUSSION

In April 1989, I took the opportunity to visit East Timor to carry out a survey of archival and library holdings in Dili as well as to conduct interviews with people who might have knowledge of Makassan contact with the area.

Following from a radio interview on the purpose of my visit to East Timor, I received a phone call from Ronny Sjamsuddin, a Makassan reporter with Antara Newsagency. He had something to show me. Would I go and talk with him? It turned out to be a small publication produced by the Department of Education & Culture which contained illustrations of historic buildings and objects in East Timor together with brief texts.

My attention was drawn to a dark photograph of a carved stone on which were some barely discernible characters. The caption suggested that from the shape of the stone, it

was possibly part of an Islamic grave but the decoration was more in keeping with classic Hindu, not East Timor culture. The inscription could not be identified.

We discussed the characters and came to the conclusion that there were two distinct scripts and two languages. The first were Arabic numerals which we deciphered as the year 1052 of the Hijrah. The other appeared to be either Lontara; Makassar or Lontara; Bugis. (Arabic is written from right to left, and Lontara is written from left to right). Apparently the stone had been found by a resident of Dili in the jungle.

I made a number of enquiries as to whom the finder of the 'Nisan' (Muslim gravestone) was, or where it was deposited, but without success.

On a later visit to Makassar I consulted with Drs Muttalib and Drs Bahru of the Department for the Protection and Conservation of Historical and Archaeological Remains and they confirmed the Arabic date as A.D. 1632. The Lontara' is Lontara' Bugis which reads - WEHIRIYA. "WE" is an honorific indicating a Buginese princess and "Hiriya" her personal name. The Christian year is based on the calculation for year 1052 Hijrah plus 580.

This was an exciting find. It was not what I was searching for but could be an indicator. I sent the news to Sjamsuddin in Dili and asked him to check further but unfortunately I had no further contact with him.

In September 1989, I returned to Dili and made further enquiries regarding the identity of the finder of the grave stone and its loca-



Fig. 1. Headstone from the grave of Wehiriya.

tion. It was only when I contacted the Director of the East Timor Museum, Drs Paulus Susilo, that I at last had some results.

He told me that he now knew who the finder of the gravestone was and where it was located. When I told him of the translation of the inscription he immediately became interested in it and agreed to my request to interview the finder and to visit the site where it was found, since he had not previously visited the site.

It was important that we endeavoured to locate the grave site as this could be an indicator to a cemetery and possibly a village of considerable age. We met with the Camat and the Kepala Desa, Francisco Da Silva, the finder of the stone.

Da Silva explained that an area of land was being cleared to make way for development of a new Kampung, when the stone was knocked over. He had removed it to a safe place since he suspected that it was of some importance although he knew nothing about it.

We were driven to the place where the stone was kept and a quick inspection showed that the inscription shown in the photograph was identical (Fig. 1). This object was quite definitely an Islamic grave post made of locally quarried stone.

From the Camat's office we drove to the small town of Hera, some 20 km from Dili by road (but no more than 3 km by sea). From the road we walked inland a few hundred metres, passing by two very old Beringin trees which probably indicate the presence of a former Kampung. We came to a place in an overgrown area amidst scrub land and gathered at a small low mound covered with grass and stones, possibly indicators of other graves.

I questioned Da Silva as to the orientation of the head stone because being an Islamic burial, as I suspected, the grave would be oriented north-south with the head to the north, and with the body lying on its right side, facing towards Mecca (in this case to the west). He

could not remember clearly but indicated an east-west orientation. I explained that it is normal in Islamic burial for there to be one headstone for a male person and a headstone and a footstone, which is usually smaller, for a female person.

He could not remember ever seeing a footstone. It was rather disappointing and inconclusive.

We discussed the situation and searched the area around for signs of other graves, but apart from the slightly elevated ground and the small rocks which were spread around there was nothing else. I then decided to take some photographs of the site and the headstone. The grass was beaten flat and, so that I could get a better view, I asked the men to pull aside a small thick bush atop the mound.

Everyone was astounded to find, *in situ*, below the bush, a small carved stone (Fig. 2). The footstone was small, made of the same material as the headstone, but with no inscription or decoration. But what was most impor-

tant was that on matching the headstone with the foot-stone, the grave was found to have a north-south orientation, thus indicating it to be an Islamic burial.

As a result of these findings further research is now being conducted on the toponymy of the area and its local history, in an endeavour to determine the history of what may quite well be the earlier village of Hera.

The two Beringin trees are 'keramat', that is, sacred to the local people, and are situated on the eastern side of a small silted-up river about 100 m away and the grave of Wehiriya is approximately 200 m to the east. The name of the grave site is called Makirate, the place of the dead, and the name of the kampung nearest the site is Manuroni. The name of the suku or tribe of this area is Mantarlidu, a part of the Kingdom of Hera which also holds authority over the island of Atauro.

From an unidentified, mid-17th century Dutch map of Timor (Fig. 3), which shows a distorted geography of the eastern part, there



Fig. 2. Gravesite of Wehiriya, showing footstone.

is shown a river named "Macassars River", which is approximately where one would expect to find Hera.

CONCLUSION

Further research should reveal the history of the site; but what will it be? The town and kingdom of Hera appear to be older than the city of Cioli. Are we searching for the ancient town of Hera or Kampung Makassar where the King of Tallo did? What was a Buginese princess doing in East Timor before the advent of the Portuguese in Dili, being an Islamic

princess when Islam was only accepted by the Kingdom of Bone in 1611? Hera Hira Hiriya??

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